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ABSTRACT

Interest in and support for language study has been strengthened in the United States in recent years by the growing recognition that proficiency in more than one language benefits both individual learners and society. For the individual language learner, research has found a positive link between second language proficiency and cognitive and academic ability. Several studies indicate that individuals who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not. Other studies correlate bilingual proficiency with higher scores on standardized tests and tests of both verbal and nonverbal intelligence. A multilingual workforce enhances America's economic competitiveness abroad, helps maintain our political and security interests, and promotes tolerance and intercultural awareness. Although the opportunities that are available for learning languages may vary depending on location, there are many ways to encourage the study of languages in the home, the classroom, and the community. This digest suggests specific ways that parents, teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and members of the business community can foster the learning of languages among children and adults. (VWL)

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Promoting a Language Proficient Society: What You Can Do

KATHLEEN M. MARCOS AND JOY KREEFT PEYTON, ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

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Promoting a Language Proficient Society: What You Can Do

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Interest in and support for language study has been strengthened in the United States in recent years by the growing recognition that proficiency in more than one language benefits both individual learners and society. For the individual language learner, research has found a positive link between second language proficiency and cognitive and academic ability. Several studies indicate that individuals who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991). Other studies correlate bilingual proficiency with higher scores on standardized tests and tests of both verbal and nonverbal intelligence (Caldas & Boudreaux, 1999; Hakuta, 1986; Thomas, Collier, & Abbott, 1993). A multilingual workforce enhances America's economic competitiveness abroad, helps maintain our political and security interests, and promotes tolerance and intercultural awareness.

Although the opportunities that are available for learning languages may vary depending on where you live in the United States, there are many things you can do to encourage the study of languages in your home, your classroom, or your community, whether you live in a small town or a major metropolitan area. This digest suggests specific ways that parents, teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and members of the business community can foster the learning of languages among children and adults.

What Can Parents Do?

- Expose your children to people from varied language and cultural backgrounds.
- Participate in events where language and cultural diversity are celebrated.
- If you speak a language other than English, use it with your children.
- Speak positively to your children about the value of learning another language.
- Provide videos, music, and books in other languages.
- Send your children to summer language camps. For older children, consider programs in which they can study languages abroad.
- Explore having an exchange student from another country in your home.
- Investigate opportunities for formal language study for your children, beginning as early as preschool and extending through their high school years.
- Reinforce existing language programs by expressing support for them to local, state, and national representatives.
- If your child is participating in a language program, talk to the teacher about what you can do at home to reinforce the learning that takes place in the classroom.
- If your child's school does not have a language program, talk with other parents, PTA members, and the principal about getting one started.

What Can Teachers Do?

- Find out which languages are spoken by school staff, by students, and in the community at large. Speak with parents and administrators about options for using community resources to promote language and cultural awareness among students.
- Use resources from school and local libraries and from the Internet to enhance foreign language lessons.
- Set up an in-class lending library with foreign language books, magazines, and videotapes for students and parents to use.
- Align your foreign language curriculum with the national standards for foreign language learning.
- Plan activities that encourage students to develop an awareness and appreciation of the linguistic and cultural diversity represented in your classroom.
- Give your students opportunities to use their languages outside your classroom (for example, within your school, at other schools, or at community events or agencies).
- Encourage parents who speak a language other than English to use it with their children.
- Talk to parents about activities and study habits that can improve their children's language learning.
- Invite community members who use languages other than English in their careers to discuss career opportunities with middle and high school students.
- Collaborate with other foreign language, bilingual, and English as a second language teachers to share resources and work together toward common goals.
- Pursue professional development activities (attend conferences, read journals and newsletters, take courses and seminars) to keep up to date on language learning research and on new approaches to language teaching.
- Travel abroad to expand or update your knowledge of the language and culture.
- Keep up with advances in language learning technology and adopt new and stimulating approaches to teaching languages, such as promoting videoconferencing experiences and international "keypal" (penpal) projects on the Internet.

What Can School Administrators Do?

If a language program does not currently exist in your school or district:

- Develop a rationale for establishing a program by reading professional literature on the importance of second language learning and the cognitive benefits of developing second language proficiency.

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- Work with district administrators or the school board to establish a steering committee made up of parents, foreign language and other teachers, district administrators at all levels, and business and community members to investigate the feasibility of establishing a program in your school or district.
- Learn about the different types of language programs to determine the most appropriate program for your school or district.
- Take inventory of existing resources (staff and materials) to determine the type and size of program your school or district can realistically support.
- Generate community support at PTA meetings and teacher conferences. Hold district-wide planning meetings and invite community leaders, business representatives, language and other teachers, and administrators. Ensure ongoing communication among all groups that have a stake in the establishment and maintenance of language programs through regular meetings and updates.

If your school or district already has a language program:

- Ensure that all students have the opportunity to study languages.
- Hire trained teachers who are skilled in the languages they teach.
- Provide resources and professional development opportunities for language teachers.
- Promote and provide opportunities for collaboration among all teachers involved in second language education. For example, establish a committee for second language teachers.
- Purchase language materials for the school library.
- Promote and support the use of new technologies to enhance language learning.
- Devote sufficient instructional time to languages other than English to enable students to achieve proficiency. This should be a minimum of 75 minutes per week, preferably at least three to five times per week for 45 to 60 minutes each. At the middle and high school levels, language classes should meet for as long as other academic classes, such as math and science.
- Promote articulation of language classes (the logical sequencing of courses in the curriculum to avoid unnecessary repetition) at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.
- For middle and high schools, hold career days to provide information about jobs that require skills in more than one language.
- Use student and community resources to strengthen the program (for example, through tutoring, international fairs, cross-cultural exchanges, and guest speakers).

What Can Policymakers Do?

- Budget adequate financial resources to establish and improve second language programs in your school, district, or state.
- Support and fund professional development programs for second language teachers.
- Support and fund curriculum development projects carried out by second language teachers.
- Establish policies that promote the study of second languages at all levels by all students.
- Support research on the effectiveness of various models and practices for second language programs.
- Support the establishment of standards for and assessment of student and teacher performance at local, state, and national levels.
- Support policies that respect the diversity of students in your community or state.

What Can the Business Community Do?

- Make policymakers aware of the need for workers to be proficient in more than one language.
- Send company representatives to school career days to talk to students about the important role that languages other than English play in the workplace.
- Talk with teachers and administrators about how they can help prepare students to work in an increasingly global economy.
- Establish partnerships with schools, other businesses, and communities to support activities such as student internships, tutoring, and mentoring.
- Ensure that jobs requiring language skills are filled by applicants who are truly proficient in the languages needed.
- Provide employees with opportunities to maintain and improve their language skills.
- Provide appropriate cultural training for employees who work in culturally diverse environments.
- Establish partnerships with school districts to provide financial support for starting or maintaining language programs.

Where Can I Get More Information?

- Many of the ideas listed here are from *Languages and Children: Making the Match*, by Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Pesola (Longman, 1994), and "Elementary School Foreign Language: The Establishment and Maintenance of Strong Programs," by Marcia H. Rosenbusch (*Foreign Language Annals, 24*, 297-31, Sept. 1991).
- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 6 Executive Plaza, Yonkers NY 10701, phone 914-963-8830, www.actfl.org, e-mail actflhq@aol.com
- Center for Applied Linguistics, 4646 40th Street NW, Washington DC 20016-1859, phone 202-362-0700, www.cal.org, info@cal.org
- National Network for Early Language Learning, Attn: Nancy Rhodes, Executive Secretary, Center for Applied Linguistics, 4646 40th Street NW, Washington DC 20016-1859, phone 202-362-0700 ext 257, www.educ.iastate.edu/nnell
- An on-line directory of resources for foreign language programs, a collaboration of the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, will be forthcoming in Summer 2000. Visit www.cal.org/ericcll/directory.html for more information.

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